

Untapped potential

Civil society and the search for peace

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Until the 1980s, Sudan had a relatively strong and well-developed civil society based primarily in the north of the country. However, politically-engaged civil society organizations (CSOs) like trade unions have increasingly been restricted by the state or supplanted by new welfare-based or issue-based organizations encouraged by the regime or by international development and relief agencies. These new organizations do not have the political role or power once held by trade unions and their capacity for influencing Sudan's peace process has been relatively weak. Sudan's civil society sector now faces significant challenges in fulfilling a peacebuilding role in the wake of the *Comprehensive Peace Agreement* (CPA).

The origins of modern civil society are in the semi-formal trade unions and religious groups of the early 20th century, and the societies and educational organizations that resisted British colonial rule in the north (which was administered separately from the south). An example is the White Flag Society: brutally suppressed in 1924, it was a seed for the modern politically-oriented CSOs that culminated in the formation of the Graduates' Congress in the late 1930s. The Graduates' Congress led the resistance to colonial rule until independence and prompted the emergence of modern political parties.

From the 1940s, trade unions were particularly influential in the anti-colonial struggle, and after independence led the toppling of the military dictatorships of Ibrahim Aboud in 1964 (when workers' and farmers' unions were the main force of change) and Jaafar Nimeiri in 1985 (when the uprising was led by professional, urban-based white collar unions since the workers' and farmers' unions had been weakened by the Nimeiri regime). In both cases, university students, notably the Khartoum University Student Union, were critical to spearheading and coordinating the revolt.



The decline of an independent civil society

After 1985, the political parties that had benefited from the trade unions' revolutionary spirit turned their back on the unions, thereby exposing democratic rule to further military coups. A new generation of civil society organizations started to emerge in response to drought, famine, the large-scale displacement and destitution caused by the renewal of the war in the south, as well as the large numbers of international NGOs (INGOs) and relief agencies that arrived. This contributed to the marked increase in modern intermediary NGOs (intermediaries between donors and target groups) which directed their efforts to serving the victims of famine and war. Government inability to address the situation contributed to a short period (1985-89) of cooperation, encouragement and some state support of national voluntary organizations and the creation of a favourable environment for INGOs operating in the country. Most of these national organizations, however, were Khartoum-based, largely non-political, service-oriented and dependent on external funding from INGOs and UN agencies, a characteristic that has remained constant ever since.

Since the 1980s there has been a proliferation of NGOs in the south, which did not have the same strong civil

society tradition as the north. Most of those that existed in SPLM/A-held areas were Nairobi-based, engaged in service delivery, and affiliated to the SPLM/A (with a few notable exceptions such as the Southern Sudan Law Society). The development of CSOs in southern Sudan was a response to the presence of aid agencies, driven by the requirement of INGOs to work with local CSOs.

Following the 1989 coup, the new regime dissolved all political parties and trade unions and NGOs were required to re-register on new conditions that prohibited political engagement. The coordinating agency for voluntary work, later named the Humanitarian Affairs Council (HAC), was transformed into a security organ, imposing heavy restrictions on NGOs. The government prohibited NGO engagement in political issues like human and civil rights and governance, restricting their activities to service delivery. Yet the National Islamic Front (NIF), which was behind the new regime, had been one of the first political parties to invest in and work through civil society for its own ends. It had started by winning control of student unions in schools and universities and gradually infiltrated certain trade unions and created a base in the army. In power, it replaced freely-formed unions with organs associated with the one-party system, and interfered directly in selecting the leadership of independent organizations ranging from

sporting clubs to the Sudanese Red Crescent Committee. Its strategy was to pre-empt the functions of existing independent organizations, supplanting them with its own bodies. Several 'Islamic' organizations were formed, supported by the state and primarily funded from the Gulf. Sudan's support to Saddam Hussein in the Gulf war halted most of the funding from the Gulf states and only the strongest and heavily state-supported survived, such as the Zubeir Charity Foundation and el-Shaheed. But given the utility of CSOs as a vehicle for receiving donor money, the number of registered organizations shot up again as Sudan's international isolation began to recede after 2002, most of them nonetheless still linked to the state and the ruling party.

In the 1990s, as well as trying to restrict an independent civil society sector, the government succeeded in transferring its social and economic responsibility for groups such as displaced persons, children and the urban poor to national and international NGOs. Amidst Sudan's isolation, the consequences of natural disaster, growing violent conflict and the short-term negative impact of economic liberalization policies, NGOs were left to address the gap left by the 10-year ban on political parties and the weakness of state governments. Meanwhile their agenda was being reshaped by increased interaction with international organizations, precipitating new visions and methods of civic action, and the spread of new development concepts like grassroots empowerment, participation and peacebuilding.

Civil society and the pursuit of peace

In the absence of legitimate trade unions and political parties, CSOs have long been active in trying to promote a peaceful settlement to the conflict in southern Sudan.

Little space was given to CSOs in formal peace initiatives, though it should be remembered that the first significant high-level talks involving the SPLM/A, the Koka Dam talks in 1986, were rooted in an initiative by University of Khartoum staff associations and trade union associations, who started the initial talks in Ambao. In more recent years CSOs have found ways to contribute to the broader peacemaking process through public lectures, workshops, newspaper articles and training sessions on peace. Fuelled by the prevalent war fatigue, the initiatives included, among others, Sudan First Forum, Nadwat al-Ameed (Ahfad), Women's Peace Network Initiative, the Group of 10, the el-Sheikh el-Gaali Initiative, and the Sudanese Initiative to Resolve Sudan's Governance Crisis. The latter, a proposal for a comprehensive settlement to Sudanese conflicts made

by a number of civil society groups in 2000, was based on the conviction that cultural diversity can form a strong basis for national unity and tackling root causes like unbalanced development, the absence of political participation and representation, and inequalities in the distribution of wealth. Peace organizations like the Sudanese Women's Peace Network and the National Civic Forum were among the first to establish direct contact with CSOs in the SPLM/A-held areas and in the diaspora. Many received external support, for example through Justice Africa's Civic Project, the Dutch government, the Heinrich Böll Foundation, the Friedrich Ebert Foundation or the United Nations Development Programme.

Civil society influence on the Naivasha process that led to the CPA was ultimately very limited. Like the northern opposition political parties, civil society was marginalized, perceived by the government as backing SPLM/A positions on the main stumbling blocks in the negotiations: religion and the state, wealth redistribution, democratic transformation and accountability. Moreover, the other Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) countries shared similar views to Sudan on the roles and rights of civil society, whose engagement in briefings and informal sessions was only made possible after the wider international community became involved. Various civil society meetings and fora created for civil society actors, such as the series of meetings convened by Justice Africa in Kampala from 1999, were to a significant extent a response to the exclusion of civil society groups from the peace talks.

Peacebuilding challenges

Following the CPA and subsequent peace agreements, civil society's immediate challenges lie in peacebuilding and democratic transformation. Meeting immediate needs must be balanced with engaging in structural change and long-term programming. CSOs can bridge the gap between what the Sudanese people want, and what the negotiating parties and the international community perceived they wanted.

Many Sudanese have yet to see a peace dividend. CSOs can contribute in many ways by:

- encouraging dialogue and promoting peaceful coexistence and cooperation between ethnic and religious groups;
- promoting civic education, democratic values and a culture of peace and human rights at the community level;
- assisting community planning and drawing attention to local, national and international problems;

- promoting regional and local development and more equal distribution of wealth and opportunities between regions and social groups;
- promoting transparency and accountability, and monitoring the use of rehabilitation and reconstruction resources;
- providing education on the environment, resource use and management, and promoting economic alternatives to reduce the pressure on resources and the likelihood of conflict;
- reducing pressure on resources through direct service provision (water, medical and veterinary) to returnees and war-affected communities.

CSOs represent the main national forces working with communities to counter the impacts of war, mismanagement of resources and poor policies. Their resources for peacebuilding include external links and extensive experience in negotiation over the last two decades, which have enabled them to survive in a hostile environment. Yet CSOs in Sudan are faced with challenges relating to government restrictions, internal failings and external conditionalities.

The government continues to try to curtail the independence of CSOs. It uses its own parallel organizations to undermine existing CSOs, especially those working on rights issues, swamping meetings held in the presence of international or UN representatives. New legal restrictions on CSOs include the Organization of Humanitarian and Voluntary Work Act (2006), which requires Ministry of Humanitarian Affairs approval of all CSO proposals before they are submitted to donors. The Ministry can also ban any person from voluntary work.

Economic deterioration, debt, political instability and ongoing conflict contribute to diverting CSOs' efforts towards addressing symptoms rather than causes, at the expense of influencing policy and legislation. CSOs lack a long-term strategic vision for their programmes and the in-depth research needed to guide their plans and priorities. The work is reactive and vulnerable to external influence by the state or donors: the regime has sought to divert civil society attention from important issues such as human rights violations in southern Sudan and Darfur, while oil production and revenues form a 'no-go area' for CSO activity.

The dependence on foreign funding and a lack of specialization among CSOs has undermined the formation of effective networks, making them competitive rather than cooperative. Donor conditionality is sometimes imposed at the expense of local priorities. Stereotyped and mostly imported methods have been adopted; for example, credit and

women's empowerment programmes are common throughout Sudan but rarely adapted to its varying local contexts. As a result, large segments of civil society, such as Sufi sects and tribal associations, are not well integrated into the civil society sector, notwithstanding some emerging interchange between tribal-level organizations and NGOs in local peacebuilding initiatives.

If the peacebuilding potential of CSOs is to be realized, a more effective civil society sector needs to be created that holds sufficient power to provide checks and balances to the executive. The government should legislate to support CSOs – or at least create a more supportive environment for them. CSOs need to improve their coordination and cooperation, building new alliances free of political polarization and dependency. They will need to build their capacity to generate accurate information upon which proper long-term planning of interventions can be made. For this they must link better with research institutions and persuade donors to finance research and surveys.

Experience from other countries shows that, to immunize itself from the state's pre-emptive and restrictive measures, civil society needs self-discipline, ethical codes and an internal commitment to the values of democracy, transparency and accountability it preaches. This will help international donors identify genuine partners. Effective, non-dependent partnerships with international organizations, the private sector and the state should be based on mutual trust and shared experience, not just financial support.